"It takes its power from the core tap," Clement said. "Just like this." He swallowed, and the sound was audible in the sudden hush. "What do we use for weapons?"

"Our teeth," snarled S'Tyge, easing his maimed arm free. "It absorbs energy like a sponge. You are sure the failure of the forcefield will kill it?" His gaze challenged Spock again.

The Vulcan shrugged. "It required the forcefield to begin with. It is half man, whatever the other half is. Most things can be killed."

T'serek said nothing, only reached out and took the knife Clement had forgotten, and offered the sword to Spock. He tapped Nadia's shoulder and took the knife she had carried, tossed it toward S'Tyge, who caught it left-handed.

"Here's a longer tooth, Romulan."

The longer the Enterprise prowled over Ixmaxh, the less Kirk liked it. He could see no signs of civil disorder, alien weapons, or even the more common Romulan variety. They picked up enough traces to be reasonably sure Romulans had been here, but they were laying off now. Kirk made the motions of preparing for an attack, but all he wanted was a delay. When Nomura's message finally came in, he told Uhura he would take it in his cabin, another delaying technique. The truth was that he felt freer arguing with his superiors in private, and if it came to an argument, he wanted room to maneuver. Unconsciously he squared his shoulders as he flicked the desk screen on.

In spite of Spock's confidence in the integrity of Ixmahx design, they almost were parboiled. As the crater around them filled with slow waves of lava, casting up blocks of cooler, unmelted stone as big as the shuttlecraft, moving them about like ice-floes, the lift began to leak steam, sulphur-tinged jets that stung in their eyes and nostrils and lungs. Spock had barricaded Nadia, Sunderson and the Speaker behind ripped up consoles, but Nadia suspected that was more to keep them out of the way than for protection. It would be no protection against whatever had dismembered the Romulans, no protection against the mountains of fire building building up around the base of the dome. The men had rigged an apparently flimsy net of wire and cable in front of the door of the lift, after wedging more metal into the doors. In the changing light of the inferno around them they were intent--T'serek, Spock and the Romulan. Nadia was searching the shadows for Clement when the floor of the lift buckled up. The light bounced wildly for a moment, shaking shadows of the wire net all around the room, then a second blow split the metal and steam under pressure gouted into the room. The net turned incandescent for a split second, burning through the fog, and in that instant Nadia caught sight of a beast's head and yellow eye. Then terror swamped her and she could only cower and wait for extinction.

T'serek also saw the eye and felt the wave of terror the beast projected, but there was no animal head for him, only a warrior's helmet turned backward, Guthrie emblem of a renegade. He attacked low with the knife, willing only one thing, to kill it before it could injure Spock. A lash of energy knocked him aside. S'Tyge drew back his left hand and threw his knife. It turned white hot and exploded in the air and a great claw of fire flamed out at him. From nowhere, the Vulcan dropped over the beast's back and tightened a cable of wire about it's throat. That, too, turned red-hot, in an instant, but did not break the Vulcan's grip, and S'Tyge launched himself right at it. T'serek felt for his knife in the rubble, couldn't find it, seized the first thing that he could lift and thrust upward at it's gut, saw the claw coming too late and turned to avoid being disembowled. It backhanded the Romulan loose and reached for Spock, claws trying to blind the Vulcan, tear him free. T'serek went again for the exposed gut and drove his weapon deep. It roared then, once, like the deep agony of the earth and smashed down at him. Spock's cable, from a grip that never faltered held deep in the neck. T'serek grabbed at one of the arms. S'Tyge went for the other, using his good hand and his stump. For a moment it faltered, and they tripped it, rolling too close to the steam, flopping away, while Spock's grip never faltered , scissoring the cable deep and deeper into the vulnerable flesh of the host until the body spasmed and spouted blood. And went limp.

They lay beside it for a moment, in the stilling flow of its blood and S'Tyge's. Spock's hands were charred black, and he didn't even try to release his grip on the cable. T'serek had to search for his knife in the choking, firelit fog and gingerly cut the head free.They could see it clearly for what it was, now, the body of an Ixmahx, with a silvery-metal helmet attached to the head. The arms and legs were also sheathed in metal. The body was burned black. The crater outside threw up a fountain of fire that rained down and turned to fireworks on the shield of the dome. S'Tyge spoke from the dark.

"Is it killed?" The fog shifted a little, and in the crater's glow they could see that he was bleeding again, slashed from neck to navel, a wound there would be no healing.

"Yes," said T'serek.

"It will be when the forcefield comes down," Spock grated, still bent over his charred hands. "You can drop it now for all of me." Hand and stump were pressed to his gaping wound.

"At--twenty-one hundred hours."

"Now you have told me, Spock. And the information--is no longer of use. How much longer?"

The Vulcan shook his head. He was past computations of any sort.

"It's not long, sir. Twelve minutes." T'serek's voice was directed half way between the two.

"You think your ship will come?" He choked as the steam swept over them and the cough was half a sob. "I don't think so--and dying is tedious. But I owe you twelve minutes. I have never regretted but one thing I did for duty. There's a device--anitmatter--the heel of my boot."

T'serek crawled over the Ixmahx and found the device imbedded in the heel, brought it back to Spock. Turned it over for him to see. Except for the one red ring painted on the side it had no moving parts.

"There is a six second delay. Make sure of that devil's weapon. The forcefield's automatic?"

"Yes, or before, if I die."